

DOCTORS' RIOT, NEW YORK, 1788

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THE Doctors' Riot in New York City on April 13-15, 1788, was one of the many episodes which marked the history of medical instruction in the United States and Britain before the passage of the anatomy acts in the 19th century. Though its story has been told often,* the following contemporary, nearly first-hand account contains interesting details. Colonel William Heth, author of the letter, had been an officer of the Virginia troops in the Revolution. Edmund Randolph was governor of Virginia. The letter was found in Executive Papers, Box 53, Folio April 11-20, 1788, in the Virginia State Library, by Herbert A. Johnson, coeditor of *The Papers of John Marshall*, of the Institute of Early American History, Williamsburg, Va.

Only that part of the letter which relates to the riot is printed. Double punctuation has been eliminated, and each sentence made to begin with a capital letter.

WILLIAM HETH TO EDMUND RANDOLPH

New York 16th April 1788

Sir

. . . . We have been in a state of great tumult for a day or two past—The causes of which, as well as I can digest them from various accounts, are as follows. The Young students of Physic, have for some time past, been loudly complained of, for their very frequent and wanton trespasses in the burial grounds of this City. The Corpse of a Young gentleman from the West Indies, was lately taken up—the grave left open, & the funeral clothing scatterd about. A very hand—

*Pomerantz, S. I.: *New York: An American City, 1783-1803*, New York, 1988; Packard, F. R.: *History of Medicine in the United States*, New York, 1931, I, pp. 236-37; Headley, J. T.: *The Great Riots of New York, 1712-1873*. New York, 1873, pp. 56-65.

some & much esteemd young lady, of good connections was also, recently carryd off. These—with various other acts of a similar kind—inflamed the minds of people exceedingly, and the young members of the faculty, as well as the Mansions of the dead, have been closely watchd. On Sunday last, as some people were strolling by the hospital, they discovered *a something* hanging up at one of the windows, which excited their curiosity, and making use of a stick to satisfy that curiosity, part of a mans arm or leg tumbled out upon them. The cry of barbarity &c was soon spread—the young sons of Galen fled in every direction—one took refuge up a chimney—the mob raisd—and the Hospital appartments were ransacked. In the Anatomy room, were found three fresh bodies—one, boiling in a kettle, and two others cuting up—with certain parts of the two sex's hanging up in a most brutal position. These circumstances, together with the wanton & apparent inhuman complexion of the room, exasperated the Mob beyond all bounds—to the total destruction of every anatomy in the hospital, one of which, was of so much value & utility, that it is justly esteemd a great public loss having been prepared in a way, which costs much time & attention, and requires great Skill to accomplish.

On Monday morning, the mob assembled again, and encreased thro' the day, to an alarming size. Vengeance was denounced [?] against the faculty in general, but more particularly against certain individuals. Not a man of the Profession thought himself safe. An innocent Person got beat & abused, for being *only dressed in black*. Two, of the young tribe were unfortunate enough to fall into their hands. But the Mayor obtaind them, upon a promise of sending to gaol—a measure, to which in their rage, they submitted—not reflecting, that *sending them to gaol*, would secure them from their violence & resentment. And therefore, so soon as they found themselves defeated in their furious intentions, respecting their captives they repaired to the goal, & commenc'd their attack (with all that intemperence & folly, which ever marks the conduct of People assembled in that way)—vainly endeavouring to break in—when they could do nothing more than break windows &c which they will be tax'd to repair. The militia were orderd out—small parties were sent to disperse them, but they instantly disarmd these detachments, & broke their guns to pieces, & made them scamper to save their lives. The evening advanced a pace—& the affair became very serious. The Governor, after trudging about all

day—first *with* the Mob in the Morning, endeavouring to pacify and accommodate; and in the afternoon, to assemble a body respectable enough to preserve the Gaol, & to restore peace & good order—advanced about dark, with a number of the Citizens, but without any kind of order, or without any other than a few *side arms* & canes—while the Adjutant Genl of the Militia about 300 yards in his rear, led up in very good order, about 150 Men—(tho' not more than half with fire arms) among whom, were many gentlemen of the City & strangers volunteers. This body were not long before the goal, before the bricks & stones from the Mob, provoked several to fire—& perhaps, their [sic] might on the whole have been 60 guns discharged—but this is mere guess. This body, made their way into the goal, where a party remained all night—but a sally of 60 or 70 were defeated. Three of the mob were killd on the spot & one has since died of his wounds, & several were wounded. One of them was bayoneted on attempting to force into a window of the Prison, which he saw filld with armd Men—a proof, of the astonishing lengths to which popular rage will sometimes carry Men. Numbers on the Governors side, besides himself, are severely bruised. Baron Steuben recd a wound first above the corner of his left eye & nose—from which he lost a great deal of blood. Mr. Jay got his scull almost crackd—and are both now laid up. Genl. Armstrong has got a bruise'd leg—but is able to go out.

Yesterday, the Militia turn'd out again, made a respectable appearance, & paraded about exceedingly—both *Horse & foot*—but it must be observd, *that the enemy were not to be heard of*. In truth, numbers who were *in the Mob on Monday evening*—turn'd out *yesterday to support government*. . . .